

Walker Percy's Lancelot: The Riven Self Welded Whole By Logos

Dr. Joy Jacob

Principal,
Mar Augusthinose College,
Ramapuram

Abstract

Walker Percy, a Physician turned novelist's Lancelot trumpets aloud the power of logos in the life of its protagonist Lancelot. Through language and intersubjectivity, Lancelot redeems himself from his malaise and angst. Fr. Percival like an alchemist transforms the life of Lancelot through his silent witness to everything that Lancelot narrates about his past.

Keywords- Language, Emergence, Confessions, Intimacy

Walker Percy's fourth novel *Lancelot* set the world at once agog and flabbergasted because, as Robert Brinkmeyer remarks, "violence and hatred for the first time take the centre stage" (84). It is the story of Lancelot the protagonist's descent into the vortex of despair and his gradual emergence from there through the power of language. Walker Percy makes Lancelot narrate his story to his childhood friend Fr., John Percival from the Centre for Aberrant Behaviour where he had been incarcerated for murdering his wife, Margrot, and for arson and adultery. The narrative trajectory adopted by Percy is the first-person confessional dramatic monologue. Percy acknowledges his indebtedness to Camus for his art. In his conversations with Lewis A. Lawson, Percy admits that "I worked on Lancelot for three years and I owe a debt to Camus. In his novel *The Fall*, one man talked to another man and that is the way it goes in mine. It is an interesting form and a difficult one, something like a dramatic monologue" (146). Percy employed this strategy to construct a subtle and densely layered story that attempts to entrap both the reader and the listener in a complicated web of sympathy, partial complexity and judgment. Such an approach provided Percy with the

opportunity both to exploit and to examine the inherent duplicity of language in general or as Derrida calls the indeterminacy of language and the widespread breakdown of language in the 20th century in particular. Through *Lancelot*, Percy raises “a series of problems that are central to contemporary thinking, signs, reorientations, and symbolic systems” (Culler 264).

Percy, in his novel, draws the attention of the readers to language, how it works in human life and what place it has in covering being and announcing one’s sovereignty. His style is precise, laconic, startling, and capable of apprehending the inner layer of reality and recovering what Hopkins calls the ‘inscape of things’. Percy, thus, uses words to investigate consciousness, to examine how we use words and are used by others. His art is reflexive where method and motive become identical and where his manner of saying becomes what he is saying. In his essay “The Mystery of Being”, Percy quotes Heidegger’s definition of the human self as ‘the being in the world whose calling is to find a name for being, to give testimony to it and to provide for it a clearing’ (Percy: *Message in the Bottle* 158). Like the phenomenologists, Percy recognizes the existence of a self that is grounded on more than Descartes’ ‘cogito ergo sum’ and relates the sign with the self. For Percy naming is a triadic communion that constitutes a name, something to be named, and another with which to share the communion. Only when the triadic relationship is consummated, can man find himself full and existing in the world with body soul together.

Percy is a stodgy structuralist who desires to stabilize the sign instead of believing like the Post-structuralists on the play of words. Percy agrees with the structuralists that there are metaphysical origins and absolute values which the Post-structuralists, particularly the deconstructionists disavow. Percy dismisses Deconstructionism as “a whimsical stepchild of French structuralism” (Percy: *Lost in the Cosmos* 87). Nevertheless, deconstructionist concepts provide a useful way to approaching Percy’s narrative strategy – especially concerning the constant framing and delimiting in which Percy’s protagonists are engaged. Where, Derrida “wants to avoid making the signifier the signified”; Percy notices a coupling and an integrated inscape between the two. For Derrida, a frame “delineates both the within and without, and thus can set up contradictions, Percy is concerned with the potential for contradictory shifts of signification only insofar as such shifts take on an existential character indicative of an existential predicament. Ultimately, it seems, Derrida sees the duplicitous

character of language as its own indictment. Language is illusory. There is finally no meaning at all because all meanings contain their own contradictions. Percy, on the other hand, views the situation in the light of radically different assumptions. The struggle with shifting signifiers is part and parcel of the tussle of the human self with freedom and limitation. It is the scuffle of Adam and Eve with the temptation to become like Gods, to transcend the concrete world of fixed names and attain a view of reality in terms of abstract dichotomies such as “the knowledge of good and evil” (Samway 44).

What defines the self as uniquely human according to Percy is one’s ability to use language in a society where words have been deprived of meaning. Selfhood, therefore, means exercising the power to name a reality. Semiotically, to be a self is to be a namer. However, the contemporary man has lost his capacity to name himself on account of the breakdown of language that has occurred due to the alienated state of modern man. Percy believes that the modern novelist’s task is to call man’s attention to this collapse in his “confused orphic way” (*Message in the Bottle* 107). The self, that is rendered asunder by modern theories and philosophies, must be welded together by the novelists and assure man of the supremacy of language to restore his lost state of innocence. A serious novelist’s commission is “to speak to the alienated man and thereby affect an aesthetic reversal of alienation” (*Message in the Bottle* 83). However, Percy affirms that the self cannot affirm itself definitively, it is “unformulable” because “once the self locates itself as the dead centre of this world, there is no signified to which a signifier can be joined to make a sign. The self has no sign of itself. No signifier applies. All signifiers apply equality”. Percy identifies this dilemma with the fall into consciousness: “from the moment the signifying self turns inward and become conscious of itself, trouble begins as the sparks flow up. The exile from Eden is semiotically the banishment of the self-conscious self from, its own world of signs” (*Lost in the Cosmos* 107- 108).

Language, according to Percy, is primarily “a naming act” that is the creation of meaning relation between “a word and its referent” by which we are able “to speak and perhaps to think about things” (*Message in the Bottle* 280). This notion of meaning derives from the unique quality of human language, the fact that every word involves an “is saying”, and an assertive that in some sense holds an identity between the word and that which it

symbolizes. Mechanistically, Percy describes this relationship as “a coupling of elements by a coupler (*Message in the Bottle* 166). The coupling of the word and the thing, however, can only be understood with reference to a triadic framework. Accordingly, the signifier or to put it in other words, the three elements – name, named and namer - form an irreducible triangle whereby not a chain of reaction but a coupling of name and named occurs thereby a meaning arises. Percy rejects the behaviorist pattern that misinterprets language by treating a word simply as another kind of environmental stimulus. A cause and effect explanation cannot account for the coupling activity language involves. Percy holds that “to set forth language as a sequence of stimuli and responses overlooks the salient traits of symbolic behaviours, symbols and words not only call forth responses; they also denote things, name thing for speakers (*Message in the Bottle* 194). Percy, thus. Assigns intersubjective colouring to language. Any attempt to analyze language without the human context is certainly going to a failure. Percy asserts that language is designed to “function in a specifically human context, intending a listener for every speaker; one for whom the name becomes meaningful” (*Message in the Bottle* 256). Percy calls man “symbol monger”; he who knows his world and indeed himself through the intercession language. “We know not as the angels do and not as dogs but as men who must know one thing through the mirror of another” (*Message in the Bottle* 82). Language involves an intentional relation i.e., intending a listener for every speaker. Thus, intersubjectivity is inherent in any symbolization. “If there were only one per in the world,” Percy writes, “symbolization could not conceivably occur. Every act of symbolization must occur either in the presence of a real you or an ideal you for whom the symbol is intended as meaningful” (*Message in the Bottle* 28).

‘The term intersubjectivity, Percy borrows from his mentor, Gabriel Marcel. For Marcel intersubjectivity is “the cornerstone of concrete ontology” (Marcel 191). Symbolization according to Marcel is “the act by which one moves from the metaphysics of *I think* to the metaphysics of *we are*. (Zeguner 28). Percy believes that the modern man’s strange behaviour, his angst and his sense of alienation spring from his failure to establish meaningful communion with others and his inability to enter into “that radical bond which connects man with reality” (*Message in the Bottle* 102). It is a uni8fication which allows each person to transcend his own separateness through sharing with and caring for the other. It

breaks down the barriers between individuals and moves from an “I –it to I-thou relation” (*Message in the Bottle* 271). It is “the meeting of minds by which two selves take each other’s meaning with reference to the same object held in common” (*Message in the Bottle* 264). Percy rejects Sartre’s contention that hell is another person and holds that another person is heaven (*Message in the Bottle* 285).

The world of Percy’s novels is essentially linguistic in nature. It is a world of signs, where words have lost their meaning and there is only the play of the signifiers. It is a world that highlights the predicament of contemporary man who leads a kind of death-in-life, a situation wherein the self refuses to be itself. Things have long since ceased for them to quiver with the life bestowed by language. The world is cut off from the self who finds himself in the world but painfully severed from it. What defines the self for Percy is one’s capability to use language. Selfhood means the power to name reality. In thus portraying our alienation, Percy desires to lead his characters to a reversal of alienation. Percy’s protagonists partake of the reversal... In one way or another, b fits and starts, Percies characters come to themselves”, begin to see their predicament and catch a glimpse of that mysterious life by naming themselves, announcing themselves through logs. As William Dowie points out, these glimpses form the basis of a kind of concrete or sensual substructure of Percy’s novels. “All of Percy’s protagonists” Comments Dowie, “become watcher, wanderers, listeners – thus opening themselves primarily to the sensual experiences of things around them (60). In Percy’s novels, it is only when subjects encounter each other as ‘thous’ only when they are open and available to each other than any sort of meaningful existence becomes possible. As Gary m. Ciuba remarks “when people enter into interpersonal relationships through language, they see everything in a new light and so it really is a new world. (20). The new vision offers Percyian heroes a new way of looking at themselves and living meaningfully in the very world which once they found stifling and chalking.

Unlike, Percy’s other heroes who establish an interpersonal nexus at the end of the novel, Lancelot, the protagonist of the novel by the same title forges an intersubjective relationship with his childhood friend, Fr. Percival, from the beginning of the novel itself. Lancelot Andrews Lamar has been living a life of shut-up-ness in his cell for a year. His meeting with the priest breaks his shell of alienation. It is perhaps because Lancelot had

known the priest since his childhood and so Lancelot found it easier to establish a communion with him.

It may be also perhaps because the priest and Lancelot were in the same quandary. Whatever be the reason, the meeting with the Priest triggers Lancelot to name himself and assert his identity. The act of naming himself bonds the speaker (Lancelot) to the auditor (Percival) as the two become conscious of the same symbol. Lancelot claims to fully have a handle on Percival: "I remember you perfectly, everything we ever did, every name you ever had (*Lancelot* 9). Lancelot is disposed to talk to Percival because he notices in him "an abstracted look in which I recognize a certain kinship of spirit" (*Lancelot* 4). Lancelot mulls over Percival as his mirror: "When I saw you yesterday it was like seeing myself" (*Lancelot* 6).

Percival, though a silent listener constantly eggs on Lancelot to rediscover himself through language i.e., by speaking and speaking. Language for Percy is "the mirror by which we see and know the world" (*Message in the Bottle* 12). Lancelot's breaking out of the shell of his silence after a year and entering into conversation with Percival indicates his fumbling onto a manner of speaking that would enable him to liberate himself from the vortex of despair and angst. Lancelot recognizes in Percival a companion in despair, and the shared sense of something wrong gives rise to his narrative. The precondition for a meaningful communion crops up when one desires to speak out one's alienation to another. Both Lancelot and the priest are goaded by their urge to open up themselves about their unspecified fretfulness to a person who understands them. This duo, thus, forms an interpersonal affinity with each other so that they can sort out their troubles and root them out. They have come to the consciousness that something is rotten in their life and it is only through communion with another that they can determine their trouble. The urgency for talking and identifying the dilemma is felt in particular by Lancelot. Thus, it is Lancelot who begins to unbolt himself to this silent listener. This move reiterates Percy's belief that "the other has been at the core of the self" (Oliver 117).

As a person detained at the Centre for Aberrant Behaviour, Lancelot lives in a world safely embalmed in memory and movies. Margot his wife's infidelity rips his complacent world apart and sends him on a quest through the inferno. He set out as a "solitary figure, a

stranger wandering in an alien world, shouting truths of modern society's sickness and corruption, determined to create a new world of honour, virtue and innocence" (Kissel 94). Margot's adultery, Lance tells the priest, did not shock him or hurt him jostled him out of his twenty-year-old dream: "I was like Rip Van Winkle rubbing his eyes" (*Lancelot* 95). He recounts to the priest his past, how he discovered his wife's infidelity and how he murdered her and her associates in sin and how he set his house on fire. He calls himself the knight of the unholy grail searching for sin through sin. However, Lancelot confesses that his quest for evil has been only a failure. He discovers nothing at all in the heart of evil. His detective work only reveals that all is beggary for there is "no unholy grail just as there was no holy grail" (*Lancelot* 237). His quest fails just because he searched for sin through sin without ever considering himself a sinner "for sin is subjective occurrence existing only with an individual psyche" (Dowie 254).

Chastened by the failure, Lancelot decides to embark on an alternative path, rejecting both the present age and the Catholic faith, to build a society that he calls "The New Reformation" or "the Third Kingdom" (*Lancelot* 163) once he is out of the prison with the woman in the next cell called Anna. Lancelot invites Fr. Percival to join him. Lancelot's design is to launch a new order by which he plans to redeem his country's honour and thereby return to the prelapsarian mythic state. The world ways have nothing to offer him. He will, therefore as Robert Brinkmeyer remarks, "start afresh, initiating a New Order in that old womb-like seat of Southern glory and defeat the Shenandoah Valley" (*Lancelot* 157). The 'Third Kingdom, he initiates is, in fact, the fascist response of Lancelot to his personal defeat which he had experienced during his life with his wife, Margot, and children.

Both Percival and Lancelot are metamorphosized during the monologue rendered by Lancelot. However, it had been a process of giving and take. So Lancelot tells the priest: I have the feeling that while I was talking and changing, you were listening and changing" (*Lancelot* 238). Lancelot's horrendous autobiographic narration affected a catharsis on both Lancelot and Fr. Percival. Thus, just like Lancelot who plans for a new way of life, the priest too takes a 'U' turn from being an abstracted therapist to an involved sharer and participant in the world. He decides to return to his parish and work as a true shepherd. Fr. Percival, through his decision becomes "Christ the man, the assured itinerant offering himself

particularly to the needy, friendless and thereby healing them” (Coles 232). Fr. Percival exhorts Lancelot to look for grace not in the street but inside himself. The authoritative voice and the assurance of the priest make Lancelot surrender his ego and follow the path of Fr. Percival. He mutters feebly, I feel so cold, Percival, tell me the truth. Is everyone cold now or is it only I”? (*Lancelot* 236). His feeling of numbness indicates that Lancelot has entered the path proposed by Percival i.e., the way of Christ. Fr. Percival helps him to name his own being, to come to terms with his limited and flawed yet sacred nature, and to receive the grace if he wishes. Certainly, Lancelot will choose, for he has listened attentively to Percival’s silence and therefore will listen to Percival’s words. Lancelot at the end emerges from the unspeakability of alienation through his communion with Fr. Percival. Lancelot realizes that he needs someone to tell him about his life and Percival is the other he badly requires.

Percy argues that two people naming the world together can create reality. Naming is at the very heart of the intersubjective nature of language. Once a person names something for another person and the two agree to call the object by a common name, they establish a world held in common under the auspices of language. And this is exactly what happens with Lancelot and Fr. Percival where man becomes a man by breaking themselves into the daylight of language.

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